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ABSTRACT

The hypothesis is examined that informal conversation with native language speakers might not be helpful for adult second language learners, because untrained native speakers have trouble modifying their speech. Conversations between pairings of native English speakers of diverse backgrounds were recorded and analyzed. The analysis indicated that native speakers did have difficulty modifying their language input; however, native speakers trained to teach English as a Second Language were more successful at language modification. The findings suggest that linguistic input provided by native speakers is not particularly useful for language acquisition, but does have considerable value as a means of improving communicative competence through social and cultural information exchange. Partner exchanges between native and non-native speakers is appended. (JL)

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CONVERSATION PARTNERS -- USEFUL LANGUAGE INPUT?
An Informal Summary of Research

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Introduction

At the 1990 Georgetown Roundtable on linguistics, Tracy Terrell described the differences which he found between caretaker and foreigner talk. He stated that informal conversation my not be helpful for adult language learning and that untrained native speakers have trouble modifying their speech, unlike the speakers of motherese. Thinking about and discussing his examples, we at the English language programs at George Mason University (GMU) and at the University of Maryland at College Park (UMCP) wondered, if this were true, why ESL students often feel that they will learn English more quickly by socializing with Americans, rather than by taking classes. We also wondered about the kinds of input our students were getting through contact with their American partners.

Description of the programs at GMU and MEI

GMU has a conversations partners program in which non-native speakers are matched mostly with American undergraduates in a cross-cultural communication course. The American students are required to participate as part of their course syllabus. The partners meet at assigned times in assigned rooms and are given topics which they may discuss, as they like. UMCP, on the other hand, matches non-native speakers, all of whom volunteer to participate, with Americans, who also volunteer, from the entire campus community. At UMCP American volunteers are a diverse group which includes, among others, retired people, staff, students studying a foreign language, and TESOL graduate students. Partners meet at mutually arranged times at whatever location is convenient for them.

Description of the taping

During the fall 1990 semester we were able to audio-tape the interactions and conversations of partners who volunteered to participate in the research project. At GMU we recorded five tapings of three different paris over a period of nine weeks. After three tapings we met with all native-speaking participants and gave them a self-assessment quiz and a short lecture about cross-cultural communication. At UMCP we recorded five tapings of five different pairs over a period of seven weeks. After four tapings we met with the conversation partner pairs to discuss strategies for improving the quality of their interactions. (The GMU assessment and the UMCP suggestions are included in the appendix.)

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Findings

We found that Terrell was right. Native speakers do have difficulty modifying their language input. (It is interesting to note, however, that TESOL-trained students were more successful at language modification.) Beyond that we also examined the functional negotiation that went on during the conversation. Although our analysis of the data showed that the linguistic input provided by the non-native speakers is not useful for language acquisition when measured against Mr. Terrell's criteria, either before or after instruction in communication techniques, it is clear that the input has considerable value as a means for improving communicative competence. The emphasis on the conversation exchanges was on functions, and this in combination with the numerous cultural and social situations they were exposed to, could be said to be the most valuable feature of conversation partner programs. Metalinguistic information, therefore, was rarely given, unless it was necessary to facilitate the communication exchange. In fact, when metalinguistic information was provided, it was often inaccurate and/or did not have any effect on non-native speaker language.

Some examples of topics and situations that were encountered were Thanksgiving traditions, Halloween, day-light savings time, styles of dress and their possible implications, restaurant protocol, job interview techniques, work habits -- e.g. teenagers working through high school, daily and weekly requirements on the job, overtime and salary potential, dating practices, scheduling time formally and informally, invitations and appointments, the family unit, requests and refusals, apologies, compliments, etc. They were also exposed to a variety of sociolinguistic features such as more careful to more casual styles of speech as the relationship progressed. One native speaker was a captain in the Navy, another a retired doctor, some were young undergraduates who used very informal speech and some were professionals in graduate school. In addition, the native speaker modeled topics normally considered acceptable for conversation, e.g. what to talk about and to whom. Some of the types of language input and examples of topics and situations where are typical in the language exchanges which we analyzed are listed in the appendix.

Conclusion

Although it might be useful for language acquisition to prepare both native and non-native speaking students more systematically for such conversational exchanges, our brief "training" meetings with the participants resulted in very little qualitative improvement in their ability to modify language or of make adjustments in conversation. It is obvious to us that a longer, more intensive type training is necessary.

Since interaction is essential for acquisition, the students were at least provided with an opportunity for interaction with native speakers which they might not otherwise have had. The quality of input may have been measured and found lacking, but the social and linguistic interaction, if measured in terms of pragmatic failure, quantity and ability to overcome breakdowns in communication, was not lacking and was valued highly by the participants.

APPENDIX

LANGUAGE INPUT IN NS TO NNS SPEAKING PARTNER EXCHANGES
Fall 1990

Functional Uses of Input

Questions: Soliciting information:

NS: . . .**Do you have any other family in the U.S. besides your sister?**
NNS: Only my sister.
NS: **Do you have any younger sisters?**
NNS: Older sister--she married.
NS: **Did she marry in the U.S. or did she marry in Korea?**
NNS: U.S. Sister graduated university. She's major nursing.

Questions: Nominating topics:

NNS: My country women a lot of major art.
NS: OK. **Let's see what else should I ask you about. Let's see. Do you watch television here?**
NNS: Yes.
NS: Do we have different shows than you have in Korea? Or is it the same in different languages?
NNS: Some same--Cosby.

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NS: So she's a nurse?
NNS: So she's study now she's RN.
NS: What does her husband do?
NNS: Government.
NS: **Let's see - - have you been to other parts of the U.S. yet--or just--Did you go to D.C.?**
NNS: I--yeah.
NS: **Did you see the monuments?**

Conversation Continuers: Fillers and repetitions

NS: Ok. So they. . .so **you talked about, you've talked about** Halloween in your class?
NNS: Yeah.
NS: What'd you learn about Halloween?
NNS Uh, the persons, uh, take the mask, uh. . .
NS: Uh-huh.
NNS: . . .and a stranger. . .
NS: . . .**puts, puts a mask.** . .
NNS: Uh, mask, yeah. . .
NS: Yeah, **puts, puts a mask.** . .
NNS: . . . puts mask on. . .
NS: Right.
NNS: Uh, dress, uh, **strange clothes. Strange, uh,**

NS: **Strange clothes.**
NNS: Yeah, yeah, very strange. . .
NS: Uh-huh.
NNS: Oh, uh, **like the ghost.**
NS: **Like a ghost, yeah.**
NNS: Or take part.
NS: Right. Go to a party.

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NS: **Yeah, I mean, I mean** the tests. . .
NNS: Yes, tests.
NS: . . .at the end of the semester. .
NNS: Yeah.
NS: They want to check what you've learned, is it always written [in China]?
NNS: Yeah.
NS: **Yeah.**
NNS: Always written. Because you've a lot of time . . .
NS: **Uh-hum, really?**
NNS: Yeah, you have the um, in . . .uh, education. . .
NS: **Uh-um.**
NNS: . . .one class perhaps have thirty student. . .
NS: **Uh-huh.**
NNS: . . .so in . . .if we have, if have oral tests you have spend one week test.
NS: **Preparing?**
NNS: No, uh, the teacher have a lot of time. . .
NS: Oh, the teacher has to spend a lot of time for the test [rephrases].
NNS: Yeah.
NS: Yeah, to listen to everybody. . .

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NS: People know what they mean, that's why I'd say that was right at the beginning. Say, it's already done.
NNS: Uh-huh.
NS: **Yeah,** they'd say it's done.
NNS: It's already done.
NS: **Yeah,** or they'd say it's done. . .
NNS: It's done.
NS: . . .as if, as if people know what that means, **right,** they go "It's, and then, done." They know the paper, they know what they're talking about, **you know,** they say your homework, and they say it's done. . .
NNS: Uh-hum.
NS: . . .**you know,** instead of going, saying, **you know,** it, it has has already been done.
NNS: Uh-huh.
NS: Which is, **you know,** which is the way to say it, but, you just say it, **you know.** . . Oh, it's done, I did it yesterday.

Clarifying for Information Exchange: Paraphrase/Rephrase

NNS: Uh, if the man perhaps have. . . the 4 or 5, uh, . . .
NS: The man is usually 4 or 5 years older?
NNS: Yeah, man perhaps have finished.

Clarifying: Use of Intonation

NNS: Eh. This . . .this for example. . .
NS: **Go out on the seat?**
NNS: . . .city. . .on the seat.
NS: **Say that again? Sit?**
NNS: Seat.
NS: Sits. He sits. Alright.

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NS: Well, what do you understand?
NNS: I understand American dating customs.
NS: Like what?
NNS: Like invitation or . . .
NS: Contact?
NNS: . . .what. . .
NS: **Arrange?**
NNS: . . .is, ah, situations.
NS: **A range of situations?**
NNS: Ah, ah, situations--or acceptable. Perhaps, uh, uh, what time begin the date in our country the some students are prohibit the dating or if you study. I think America free perhaps not so limited.
NS: Uh, huh, that's right.
NNS: So I try to understand something. In our country general if a girl pass her 20 or 22 years old, if you. . .
NS: **She is usually 20-22 years old?**
NNS: Ah, 20 or 22 years old. . .

Pronunciation

NNS: That is not national.
NS: Oh.
NNS: This is local
NS: Oh, yeah.
NNS: Because uh China have the uh different levels (?) in university. . .
NS: Uh-hmm.
NNS: So the lower level university is. . . .
NS: Uh-huh
NNS: They have the same tests
NS: Uh-hum.
NNS: The high level university have the high level tests. . .

NS: More difficult.
NNS: Yeah.
NS: Yeah.
NNS: Like American. . .
NS: Uh-hum.
NNS: . . .Ivory. . . .
NS: **Ivy?**
NNS: **Yeah, Ivory.**
NS: **Ivy League Schools you mean?**
NNS: **Yeah, Americans have the . . . the ivory school.**
NS: **Yeah, uh huh, "Ivy".**
NNS: Uh-huh, Ivy, yea.

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NNS: Uh, our culture, uh, teach that in elemen, elementary school and junior senior school. . .
NS: Uh-huh.
NNS: The many, uh, student haven't, uh, **mass class** in their school.
NS: Ah, I see. So the curriculum, the courses that you have to take, are more difficult in China. . .

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NNS: Yes. I think that's no problem. Because, because her, her she can her. . .
NS: **Hear.**
NNS: . . .my sound and your sound to do the research.

<u>Metalinguistic</u>: Usually inaccurate

NNS: Smile, and in "e", but when you . . . eh. . .when you, when you does. . .
NS: When I what?
NNS: When you does. When you does the "e".
NS: When you drop the "e", and add -ing. OK.
NNS: Yes, eh. . .You drop off this. . .
NS: Oh, ok. Oh, oh, that's what you mean! But, uh, that doesn't uh, make it plural. That just changes into the uh. . . .the form the verb form -ing. Progressive.
NNS: Yes.
NS: But it is difficult. You just have to memorize like, for instance, sit. You don't say s-i-t-i-n-g. You have to say s-i-t-t-i-n-g. I don't know if there's any rule that says, uh, after a "t", you have to double that consonant "t". Uh, let me see. Smile. When it ends in "e', you drop the "e" and add -ing. Here. When you have one vowel and one consonant, you double the consonant, so the rule, that's the rule. If you have a vowel like the "i" in sit, afterwards like "t", you double the consonant, meaning the "t". Sit and run are good examples. Now, when you have two vowels, uh,

and a consonant like rain. . . the "ai" are vowels. "n" is a consonant. You just simply add -ing, uh, up here you added -ing, but you dropped the "e". Here's there's no "e". Uh, it's not r-a-i-n-e. Rain. So you just, when you have two vowels and a consonant you, uh, you then add -ing. Last, when you have two consonants. . . . . .And as a result of adding the "t", "sitting" and "running", uh, like you say "writing". If it's w-r-i-t-t-i-n-g, it would be writting. [Tries to make a pronunciation distinction]. But it's simply writing. Writing and smiling. Not "Smiuhling. So, uh. . .that. . .this is what you'll just have to memorize.

Acceptable topic/question model examples

NS: What did you do for the year after the senior high school? Did you attend classes or did you just study at home?

NS: And they make some money to, uh, to go to the movies, just to have some money to do things and to buy things.

NS: How much is rent? Do you live with your family?

NS: . . . What are you interested in? [job/career]

NS: Do people drink alcohol?

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Many of the examples of the types of situations and topics encountered are also models of acceptable topics.

Examples of cultural and sociolinguistic situations

NS: Oh, OK. Did you ever have a job while you were going to school?
NNS: Oh, no, uh, when I was young I entered the military, a military school. I study continue 'till now. I haven't go out and work.
NS: Except for in the Marine Corps for two years.
NNS: Yes.
NS: Oh, so then most students don't have, uh, like part-time jobs like here in the States. My kids, for instance, go to high school. . .
NNS: Um-huh.
NS: . . . and the university, but they work, uh, 10 or 20 hours a week, uh, to make some extra money.

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NS: I think, that's common in a lot of countries where . . . in your country it used to be, I think I heard, the numbers are something like, uh, 100 years ago, something like 75% of 80% of Americans were working on farms.
NNS: Um-huh.
NS: And, uh, 50 years ago it became something like 25% who worked on the . . . and now it's something like 5% working on farms.

NNS: But I don't know Halloween holiday, what we do in Halloween.
NS: Ok. It used to . . . it used to be a religious holiday.
NNS: Religious?
NS: Yeah, and, and they a long time ago. Uh, I think mostly from, uh, Catholic religion. November 1 . . .
NNS: Ah, in our country the dating is like more narrow than American dating.
NS: Stri, strict?
NNS: Has strict when some man woman has tried to develop their loving relation. Perhaps American is more romantic, more . .
NS: No, I don't think so!
NNS: Ah, I don't think so. This is my first, uh, think, not a . .
NS: Well, I think some Americans are romantic, but not all.
NNS: Not all.
NS: Maybe we don't, we're not as serious as your culture is about that. Sometimes it's not--people don't maybe don't think it's as important, it sounds like in your country it's very important (yeah, important) who you go with. You must go with the proper, suitable person. (yeah)

* * * * * * * * * * *

NS: What time did I get back? (yeah.) Last night. (oh, last night) Yes, so umm I can't meet you Tuesday or Wednesday. I've got two exams this week. We can meet next week at this time (OK) Ok? (no problem) OK, what did you do this weekend?

* * * * * * * * * * *

NS: Well, you look very nice today. Are you dressed up for some reason?
NNS: Ah, Mondays are very busy so for more energy (oh, for more energy) energy . . . if you, you lady you can wear many things.
NS: Yeah, but usually I wear nice clothes when all of my other clothes are dirty . . .

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NS: I think your wife will be very lucky for you to cook so many things. Is that right?

* * * * * * * * * * *

NNS: Uh, another question is if you don't understand me,you, can you say "Excuse me, pardon, could you speak slowly" or "repeat your question."

COMMUNICATION SELF ASSESSMENT
(Given to GMU Native Speakers After 3 Tapings)

To assess your ability to effectively communicate in a multicultural setting, rate your responses to the statements below. Use a scale of 1 to 5 to rate how strongly you agree with the statements, 1 being low agreement and 5 being high.

_____1. I use simple words and avoid jargon or slang.

_____2. I listen as much as I speak; I do not interrupt.

_____3. I allow extra time to communicate.

_____4. I consider the effect of cultural differences on messages being transmitted and I check my assumptions.

_____5. I adapt my style to the demands of the situation.

_____6. I never make jokes which might be misunderstood.

_____7. I never make remarks that are offensive to others.

_____8. I speak slowly, audibly, and distinctly.

_____9. I appreciate different ways of communicating.

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